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Chairman: Mr. Chowdhury ..... (Bangladesh)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 116: Proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 *(continued)* (A/52/6/Rev.1 (vols. I and II), A/52/7, A/52/16, A/52/278, A/52/303 and A/52/379; A/C.5/51/53)

General debate (continued)

1. **Mr. Retta** (Ethiopia) said that his delegation associated itself with the statement made by the representative of the United Republic of Tanzania on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. In its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 the Committee should bear in mind the following points: the United Nations was undergoing reform to make it more effective in meeting its objectives; its financial situation was at a critical stage and the implementation of mandated programmes was threatened; the regular budget and core resources were declining; and there was an upward trend in non-budgetary resources.

2. His delegation commended the Secretary-General's intention to increase resources for economic and social development, but as yet such resources did not match the needs, especially of the least developed countries and Africa. The budget proposals for development in Africa showed a 1.9 per cent increase for the biennium 1998-1999 as compared with the current biennium. That was a very small increase, and all possible means of increasing the resource level should be explored.

3. The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) had made a significant contribution to Africa's development and had facilitated its integration into the globalized world economy. More resources had to be channelled to ECA to enable it to attain its objectives. ECA also played an important role in strengthening the regional economic communities, which were regarded as cornerstones for the realization of an African economic community. Care should be taken to avoid duplication of work by ECA and those communities and to ensure that the deployment of 25 per cent of the ECA staff to subregional centres did not undermine its central functions.

4. His delegation attached paramount importance to programme 9 (Trade and development) of the medium-term plan for the period 1998-2001, since the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) had served as a focal point for the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the 1990s. If the principles agreed upon during the mid-term review of the Programme were to be applied before the global review in 2000, reasonable resources would have to be allocated for its activities.

5. The hiring of international consultants was a source of concern, and the comments made by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) in paragraph V.19 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 (A/52/7 (chap. II, part V)) concerning the relationship between consultants and ECA staff deserved support.

6. The reductions in costs and staff proposed by the Secretary-General must not be an end in themselves nor should they adversely affect mandated programmes. The implications of those administrative measures must therefore be carefully studied in order to promote trust between the Member States and the Secretariat.

7. **Mr. Saguier Caballero** (Paraguay), speaking on behalf of the Rio Group, said that the Group associated itself with the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The various reports of the Advisory Committee and the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) would be very helpful to the Fifth Committee, even though CPC had been unable to make recommendations on all the sections of the proposed programme budget.

8. Because of the exceptional conditions in which it had been approved, the programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 had constituted a departure from the normal decision-making process. As a result of a political deal, the General Assembly had decided that the total expenditures for that biennium would total $104 million less than the amount provisionally agreed upon. During the biennium, the Member States had then had to identify how to distribute the budget cuts while ensuring that all the programmes were fully implemented. The result was that 1996 had become a new budget year, disrupting the biennialization of the Committee's agenda. The programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 was still unfinished and, in that connection, the Rio Group reiterated the concerns expressed in its statement at the Committee's 7th meeting. Between that unfinished budget and the new proposals, the Organization had experimented with all sorts of administrative action, not necessarily consistent with the budgetary and administrative rules. In addition, since 1987 it had been in a state of reorganization and financial difficulty. Nevertheless, the Rio Group acknowledged the Secretary-General's efforts to secure institutional reform.

9. The initial estimates for the biennium 1998-1999 showed a net decrease of $123.9 million. As the Advisory Committee had correctly pointed out, the exact figure of the total budget for the biennium would depend on an evaluation

of whether the total figure was compatible with the full implementation of all mandated programmes and activities.

10. With regard to the Advisory Committee's observations on changes in the budget methodology and in budgetary procedures, he pointed out that, in resolution 51/221, the Assembly had prohibited any such changes without its prior approval, through ACABQ. However, without such approval, the proposals for the biennium 1998-1999 included net budgeting for the International Civil Service Commission (ICSC), the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and the services provided by the United Nations at the Vienna International Centre. Without prejudice to the merits of net budgeting, it was disquieting that $39.2 million had been cut and 356 posts abolished. The Secretariat should consider reintroducing gross budgeting. On a related issue, the Secretary-General's proposal on budgeting by results required greater elaboration, for it represented a considerable departure from the budget methodology set out in resolution 41/213.

11. The Secretary-General was requesting a total of 8,973 posts, a net reduction of 1,173 temporary and permanent posts. The Rio Group was not opposed to staff cuts but was concerned about cutting posts which had been deliberately left vacant during the biennium 1996-1997 without any evaluation of the impact on programme implementation. The Secretary-General's report on the impact of savings measures on the implementation of mandated programmes and activities (A/C.5/51/53) left no doubt as to the negative repercussions. Furthermore, the Rio Group endorsed the Advisory Committee's view that the postponement of programmed activities did not imply their cancellation, merely their postponement until the following biennium.

12. It was essential to strengthen United Nations activities connected with economic growth and sustainable development. In that connection, the Rio Group attached special importance to the work of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and would welcome additional information about the pilot project at ECLAC referred to in paragraph 30 (b) of the ACABQ report (A/52/7) so that the General Assembly could evaluate the expected impacts and benefits. In resolution 51/220, the General Assembly had decided that the preliminary estimates for the next biennium did not include a provision for special missions for which there were no legislative mandates. The estimates for the missions to which the Rio Group attached special importance were still not known, but they should not be financed at the expense of development activities.

13. The estimates for extrabudgetary resources totalled 170 per cent more than the regular budget estimates. As the Advisory Committee had stated, much remained to be done with respect to extrabudgetary activities: its recommendation that the role of extrabudgetary financing should be explained in the narrative part of the programme budget deserved support.

14. The Rio Group understood that the budget proposals for the biennium 1998-1999 were essentially preliminary and it would like to know the Chairman's views about the best way to use the resources allocated to consideration of the item. It wished to reiterate, in conclusion, that the exercise of approving the programme budget would be pointless unless the Member States met their financial obligations and provided the resources necessary for carrying out the approved activities.

15. **Mr. Kamal** (Pakistan) said that his delegation appreciated the work done by ACABQ and CPC and associated itself with the statements made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 and on the Secretary-General's report on the impact of savings measures (A/C.5/51/53). That report showed that a number of programmes and activities had been adversely affected, notwithstanding the assurances given by the Secretary-General that care would be taken to ensure that mandated activities were not affected (A/C.5/50/57/Add.1, para. 5). It also pointed out that the budget reductions had placed an extra burden on the staff. His delegation agreed with the Secretary-General that the Secretariat must be fully equipped to meet future needs. The Advisory Committee had rightly pointed out, in that connection, that the Secretary-General should present proposals on the total funding requirements to ensure full implementation of all mandated programmes and activities; the General Assembly had also repeatedly requested the Secretary-General to submit the budget proposals on a full-cost basis. It nevertheless remained the responsibility of Member States to restore the Organization's financial base and provide assured political and financial support.

16. There was an apparent contradiction between the report on the impact of savings measures and the budget proposals for the coming biennium: in view of the resource constraints during the current biennium, the proposals for the biennium 1998-1999 should have made adequate resource provision in order to avoid the recurrence of difficult situations. In fact, the proposals represented a reduction in the resources required for the implementation of mandated programmes and activities. In 1996, in his report on the proposed programme budget outline for the biennium 1998-1999 (A/51/289), the Secretary-General had

proposed a reduction of $178.9 million compared with the initial appropriation for 1996-1997. The Advisory Committee had requested that the General Assembly should be provided with the specific components of the proposed reduction and an explanation of its practical implications. The resources now requested for the biennium 1998-1999 showed a net reduction of $123.9 million compared with the revised appropriation for 1996-1997. That request would have to be examined thoroughly to ensure that approved mandates and activities were not affected once again. The Secretariat should provide a full justification for the reduction in the level of resources.

17. His delegation agreed with ACABQ that a high vacancy rate hampered the delivery of mandated programmes and made the budget process less transparent and staff management more difficult, and that the proposed staff reduction should be justified in the same way as staff increases. In document A/51/289, the Secretary-General had proposed cutting 1,000 posts, and in document A/51/950, he had stated that a plan to phase out gratis personnel would be submitted. The two issues could not be considered in isolation from one another. The staff reduction had now been formally proposed, but the plan to phase out gratis personnel had yet to be carried out. The Committee should request the Secretary-General to submit that plan before it began informal consultations on the budget proposals for the biennium 1998-1999.

18. The Secretariat should not propose anything in the budget which went beyond the mandates set out in the medium-term plan and the relevant General Assembly resolutions. It was the responsibility of Member States to ensure compliance with the legislative mandates and to provide resources commensurate with those mandates, in fact to heed the Secretary-General's appeal for continuous, predictable and assured political and financial support. His delegation endorsed the Advisory Committee's observation that any lowering of the standards of rigorous budget scrutiny must not be permitted and that any changes in the budget process should be made in accordance with agreed procedures. In that connection, it reaffirmed the importance of rule 153 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

19. The Financial Regulations of the United Nations and the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly concerning the demands for independent audits and management reviews must also be respected. The Organization's auditors had a vital role to play in restoring its financial health, and their recommendations should be fully implemented. The Organization should also devise accountability rules applicable to losses caused by mismanagement.

20. His delegation endorsed the Advisory Committee's recommendation that the Secretariat should be held strictly accountable for the submission of documentation in accordance with the six-week rule. Once again, owing to the late submission of documents, the Advisory Committee had had to reschedule its meetings and, as a result, the Fifth Committee would be under great pressure to finish its work on time.

21. The Secretary-General had emphasized the need for expeditious consideration of his reform proposals. In his address to the General Assembly during the current session, the Prime Minister of Pakistan had expressed support for the reform process, while emphasizing the cardinal importance of the Charter, and had gone on to say that, although the United Nations stood on the brink of bankruptcy, the reforms must not fall victim to the narrow preferences of a chosen few, for true reform had to take into account the interests of all. His delegation would continue to work assiduously for the realization of the promise which the United Nations had made to mankind.

22. **Mr. Powles** (New Zealand), speaking also on behalf of Australia and Canada, said that, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, world leaders had challenged the secretariats of the system to improve significantly their efficiency and effectiveness in administering and managing the resources allocated to them. The Secretary-General's current budget and reform proposals had fully responded to that challenge; he had for the first time produced a budget based on negative real growth while respecting the medium-term plan. Furthermore, the Secretary-General had given assurances that the proposed reductions would not affect the implementation of mandated programmes and activities. He deserved commendation for restoring most of the activities postponed or curtailed in 1995. It was especially gratifying that the budget cuts had been made possible in part by reductions in overhead spending and were being effected without the involuntary separation of a single staff member. Many Member States had suffered the imposition by their national legislatures of similar budgetary constraints and had had to review the way in which they organized and conducted their business. Such a review was even more complex for an Organization which had to reconcile the interests of 185 Member States. Budget discipline could, however, promote sound management, as ACABQ had noted as early as 1948. Such discipline could be especially important when income flows were uncertain.

23. It was also gratifying that the Secretary-General had been able to propose a net increase of some $56 million for social and economic development. That increased provision, coupled with the proposal for a development dividend

account, should ensure improved delivery of high-quality services to Member States. The three delegations supported the Secretary-General's broad policy objectives and the increased attention given to the special needs of Africa, the least developed countries and small island developing States. The increased resources for work on the advancement of women was also welcome, as was the news that the Office of Internal Oversight Services would at last be on a full-cost budgeting basis. While reductions in almost all areas of activity might be unavoidable in the current situation, the crucial mandates of the human rights programme could not be sustained without a more adequate resource base, and the essential coordination functions in humanitarian emergencies should be fully supported, in the medium term, by funding from the regular budget.

24. The total resources requested for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations still did not fully reflect the requirements for the activities undertaken by the Secretariat and the Department remained disproportionately dependent on gratis personnel and on staff funded from the support account to discharge its basic functions. Consideration of the issue, moreover, continued to be affected by the lack of a clear picture of the Department's overall staffing needs and of proposals for meeting them.

25. The time had come for specific budgetary provisions to be made for special missions relating to peace and security, since the Organization's experience and expenditures over the past 10 years showed that peacekeeping functions, if not individual mandates, were of a perennial nature. A specific recurrent line item in the budget was therefore justified and a suitable mode of financing should be found to link the utilization of resources to mandates so as to avoid the danger of over-assessment.

26. On the question of additional expenditures related to currency and inflation movements and mandatory increases in staff remuneration, the delegations on whose behalf he was speaking could not endorse automatic cost escalations and increments and wished to see a more systematic and prudent approach taken in the matter in order to minimize the possibility of "add-ons" to the initial level of appropriations.

27. On the question of budget methodology, he supported in principle the concept of net budgeting for all jointly financed activities and services, since it provided a more accurate reflection of true expenditure levels. Fuller details of the Secretary-General's proposals, including estimates of income and staff assessment, however, were needed before any final decisions could be taken.

28. In that connection, he regretted that the financial statements for 1996, which should have been submitted to the Board of Auditors no later than 31 March, had not yet been issued. He was disappointed that forecasts of projected expenditure for the current biennium had been omitted from the budget documents despite the request by the General Assembly in resolution 48/228.

29. There was no empirical evidence to support the Advisory Committee's view that further analysis was needed to confirm that the efficiency reviews undertaken during the current biennium had mitigated the impact of budgetary reductions on programme delivery; it would therefore not be an efficient use of the Committee's time to continue to debate the issue. Within the severe budgetary constraints imposed by the General Assembly, the Secretariat had achieved a creditable level of programme delivery, mostly through productivity gains realized from the use of new technology. Efficiency reviews and pilot projects were a normal feature of modern management culture and it was only when an initiative would impinge on mandates or existing staff and financial regulations that the relevant intergovernmental authority needed to be involved.

30. The Advisory Committee had chosen to comment exhaustively on the issue of efficiency gains, at the expense of advising the General Assembly properly on the general features of the current budget proposal. For example, the Secretary-General's emphasis on social and economic development in developing countries seemed to have escaped its attention.

31. The full implementation of mandated programmes, however, depended as much on payment by Member States of their assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions as it did on the Secretary-General's ability to run an efficient and effective Organization. Budget discipline and management reform could not be a substitute for the provision of the agreed level of basic resources, especially by those Member States which had the capacity to pay. Nothing less than the fulfilment of those fundamental Charter obligations was acceptable.

32. **Mr. Mabilangan** (Philippines) noted that the planning, programming and budgeting process outlined in General Assembly resolution 41/213 had come under severe pressure from the constant state of re-organization and financial difficulties which had plagued the Organization over the past 10 years. He therefore hoped that, once the General Assembly had taken appropriate action on the Secretary-General's reform proposals, the Secretariat and the legislative bodies would then be able to focus on achieving

the Organization's goals and objectives, as set out in the Charter.

33. The reduction in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 compared with the budget for the current biennium should not be taken to mean a reduced role for the Organization and should not affect the full implementation of all mandated programmes and activities, especially in the field of international and regional cooperation for development. His delegation in principle welcomed the Secretary-General's proposal that the proportion of regular budget resources devoted to administration and other non-programme costs should be reduced and that the savings should be redirected to substantive programmes in the economic, social and related fields. Member States, however, must be provided with the data and analysis necessary for them to reach an informed decision. His delegation therefore looked forward to the information which ACABQ had requested in paragraph 30 (c) of its report (A/52/7).

34. His delegation noted the Secretary-General's proposals for reductions in the staffing level and wished to seek assurances from the Secretariat that the reductions would not adversely affect the full implementation of mandated programmes and activities. It would have been preferable for the Secretary-General to have included in his budget proposal all the posts needed to ensure the implementation of approved programmes and activities without the need to resort to gratis personnel.

35. His delegation was also uncertain about the feasibility of achieving the proposed vacancy rate of 5 per cent for Professional staff and 2.5 per cent for General Service staff during the biennium 1998-1999, given the level of proposed post reductions and its implications for the efficient and effective delivery of mandated programmes and activities. It commended the dedication of the many staff members who had had to assume additional responsibilities and wished to stress the importance of providing staff with adequate training to enable them to respond effectively to the changing needs of the Organization.

36. The concept of net budgeting required further elaboration. His delegation shared the view expressed by ACABQ in paragraph 45 of its report that, pending a specific decision by the General Assembly on the concept, the status quo of budgeting on a gross basis for the Joint Inspection Unit and the International Civil Service Commission should be maintained. Once the Organization's budget was approved, however, Member States must faithfully honour their Charter obligations and pay their assessed contributions in full, on time and without conditions.

37. **Ms. Flores Prida** (Cuba) said that the fundamental aim of the Committee's decisions on the proposed programme budget must be to provide the Organization with the resources which it needed to discharge its mandated programmes and activities fully and effectively, to restore and improve the quality of the services provided, and to help to dispel the uncertainty which had developed following the adoption of resolution 50/214, as a result of political pressure. The international community had hoped that resolution 41/213, which represented a delicate political balance and was aimed at resolving the Organization's financial difficulties, would remove the obstacles that prevented the largest contributor from paying its assessments in full and on time. Those hopes had not been realized and the Organization continued to be gripped by a crisis caused mainly by the politicization of contributions and, to a lesser extent, by the economic difficulties faced by a number of developing countries, including her own.

38. The process which had led to the adoption of resolutions 50/230 and 50/231, as well as the letter and spirit of those resolutions, were a violation of resolution 41/213. Such violations were also present in the proposed programme budget presented by the Secretariat, in section 22 of which funds were requested for non-recurrent activities, which, if approved, should be financed from the contingency fund. Her delegation was opposed to those appropriations and proposed that the level of funding requested for such activities should be reduced.

39. In her delegation's view, the budget should not be used to introduce new proposals or to prejudge the outcome of intergovernmental negotiations. Strict compliance with resolution 41/213 by the Secretariat and Member States and the fulfilment by the latter of their commitments under the Charter would help to restore mutual confidence, attract qualified personnel and contribute to the implementation of the purposes and principles of the Charter. Her delegation also shared the Advisory Committee's views on the need to return to the traditional budgeting process.

40. The Advisory Committee's view that many of the estimates of cost reductions were notional (A/52/7, para. 19) called into question the justification for the budget cuts contained in the proposed programme budget outline for the biennium 1998-1999. In view of the link between the budget reductions achieved through the adoption of efficiency measures and the number of posts to be abolished, the proposal concerning the elimination of a large number of posts should also be subject to careful scrutiny with a view to the restoration, if necessary, of the funds and posts which the Secretary-General proposed to eliminate.

41. The Committee must undertake a detailed analysis of the impact of savings measures on the implementation of programmes. Her delegation was concerned about the clearly negative impact of those measures on the implementation of mandated programmes and activities and hoped that the level of appropriations approved for the biennium 1998-1999 would redress the situation. In that connection, it supported the recommendation contained in paragraph 30 (a) of the Advisory Committee's report. It also supported the recommendation that the "result-based" approach to budgeting should not be implemented unless the General Assembly so decided.

42. Her delegation noted that the Secretariat had introduced other budgetary innovations which entailed significant changes in approved procedures. It therefore wished to reaffirm the validity of the provisions of resolution 51/221(B), paragraph 21, and to support the Advisory Committee's recommendations on the matter. Moreover, in order to remove the anomalies contained in the proposed programme budget, the funds and posts which had been eliminated as a result of the application of the net budgeting approach should be added to the funding and staff resources requested.

43. During the current biennium, serious problems had arisen with regard to the vacancy rate, including its use to realize additional savings by maintaining the recruitment freeze until 21 April 1997, despite General Assembly decision 51/456. The relevant information must therefore be made available to the General Assembly to enable it to take the corrective measures needed to ensure the full implementation of all of its mandates. The information should state, *inter alia* the reasons for the delay in the implementation of decision 51/456; the total amount of savings achieved as a result of the delay in lifting the recruitment freeze; the current status of the process of recruitment of personnel to fill the vacant posts; and detailed information on the vacant posts earmarked for abolition under the proposed programme budget for the next biennium.

44. Finally, her delegation regretted that, in certain cases, the proposed distribution of resources among the various budget sections was not in keeping with the priorities set out in the medium-term plan for the four-year period 1998-2001. In particular, it would have liked to see more resources allocated for the economic development of the developing countries, which faced severe economic problems.

45. **Mr. Asadi** (Islamic Republic of Iran) said that the mandates of the General Assembly and of the relevant intergovernmental bodies should not be altered to fit a certain budget level at the expense of mandated programmes and activities, especially those in the field of international and regional cooperation for development. His delegation had noted with concern the Advisory Committee's observation that there was no way of knowing whether the proviso that all approved programmes and mandates should be fully implemented could be honoured (A/52/7, para. 9).

46. The report of the Secretary-General on the impact of approved savings measures on the implementation of mandated programmes and activities (A/C.5/51/53) reflected the contradiction between the assurances given that mandates would be fully implemented at the level of resources requested for the biennium 1998-1999 and the serious problems encountered in fulfilling those assurances. Because savings had been identified without any prior determination of programme priorities, decisions had been made by programme managers to discontinue certain programme activities and to delay others without any consideration for legislative mandates and without consulting Member States.

47. His delegation was also concerned about the number of posts proposed for abolition and the possible negative impact on the Organization's capacity to implement its programme of work in full. The level of resources to be released by the proposed reduction of posts and the impact on programme delivery and on the Organization's institutional memory should all be carefully examined. Any exercise in staff reduction must also respect the principle of equitable geographical distribution as well as the international character of the United Nations.

48. His delegation believed that the proposed programme budget should have included all the posts needed to ensure that the various departments of the Secretariat were able to carry out their approved programmes and activities without any need to resort to gratis personnel. That objective could have been achieved by simply reducing the number of posts which the Secretary-General proposed to abolish.

49. He was concerned that, in a number of instances, the abolition of posts had been accompanied by requests for additional funds for consultants and expert groups. It was important to know how many consultants and short-term staff (and from which countries) were currently engaged in the delivery of mandated programmes. Increasing reliance on that category of staff concealed the substantial shifts in the equitable geographical distribution of staff in the Secretariat. Moreover, the replacement of permanent staff by short-term employees undermined the institutional memory of the Organization and could affect the delivery of work programmes. His delegation would welcome

information as to how the Secretary-General was responding to the request contained in resolution 51/226 that he should refrain from the practice of using consultants to carry out functions assigned to established posts.

50. In conclusion, he said he was concerned about the change in the methodology applied to the uniform vacancy rate, which gave the mistaken impression that a real increase in resources had been achieved, particularly in the economic sections of the programme budget.

51. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation supported the statement made on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 had been submitted to the General Assembly at a time when the Organization was in severe financial difficulties as a result of the non-payment of arrears by countries which were well able to afford to pay them. That created an unfavourable atmosphere for budgetary discussions.

52. His delegation believed that the proposed programme budget should be discussed separately from the proposals contained in the report of the Secretary-General concerning the financial and administrative effects of the reform process (A/52/303); since Member States had yet to agree on reform measures, those measures could have no bearing on the discussion of the proposed programme budget currently before the Committee.

53. His delegation supported the Secretary-General's determination to reduce administrative expenditure and redistribute responsibilities provided that the implementation of the Organization's programmes was not affected. The introduction of the performance appraisal system, as stated in the Advisory Committee's report (A/52/7, para. 108), had involved significant direct and indirect expenditure, while other, much more important programmes were being severely cut back.

54. His delegation had noted the Secretary-General's proposed reduction of posts. The issue of gratis personnel was also very important, since it was interrelated with that of post reductions.

55. His delegation attached great importance to the activities of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and welcomed the increase in the level of resources proposed for it. It was, however, disturbed by the proposal that three posts in the Professional category and above and 26 Local level posts should be abolished and wished to stress that the need for each abolition should have been clearly stated, as recommended in the first report of the Advisory Committee (A/52/7, para. 72). He hoped that the estimated amount of more than $15 million for recosting would not form part of the proposed increased level of resources.

56. With regard to section 24, Palestine refugees, he noted from paragraph 24.2 that the ability of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to continue to provide essential education, health and relief and social services was entirely dependent on sufficient voluntarily contributed funds being made available to it annually. However, in resolution 3331 (XXIX), section B, the General Assembly had decided that the expenses for salaries of international staff in the service of UNRWA which would otherwise be a charge on voluntary contributions should be financed by the regular budget of the United Nations for the duration of the Agency's mandate. The resources allocated to UNRWA from the regular budget should therefore be sufficient to allow it to carry out its humanitarian activities. The abolition of a number of posts would increase the burden on the Agency.

57. In the proposed programme budget (A/52/6/Rev. 1, para. 3.46), the Secretary-General had proposed the abolition of 23 posts in the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO). While he appreciated that the mandate of nine military observers in Egypt had to some extent been completed, he found it difficult to understand the proposed abolition of 23 posts. He hoped that the efficiency of UNTSO would not be adversely affected by the proposed administrative changes and reductions; it still had the mandate it had been given pursuant to Security Council resolution 50 (1948), and the reasons for that mandate would remain for as long as Israel continued to occupy Arab territory.

58. He was concerned to note the proposal regarding the redeployment of two posts from the decolonization programme (A/52/6/Rev. 1, para. 2.101), since decolonization was one of the core concerns of the United Nations. No explanation had been offered for that redeployment.

59. **Mr. Farid** (Saudi Arabia) said that his delegation had requested the Secretariat to submit the performance report for 1997 before Member States embarked on their discussion of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999. It would be impossible to judge how much the United Nations was likely to spend in the forthcoming biennium without knowing what had been spent in 1997. The Secretariat should state in writing why it had been unable to submit the relevant report.

60. **Mr. Halbwachs** (Controller) said that what had been requested was an account of expenditure during 1996. It

would be impossible to issue the performance report for 1997 before December; in that respect, 1997 was no different from any other year.

61. **Mr. Farid** (Saudi Arabia) sought an assurance that the 1996 figures would be made available prior to the discussion of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999.

62. **Mr. Halbwachs** (Controller) gave such an assurance.

Agenda item 118: Joint Inspection Unit *(continued)* (A/51/34 and A/51/559 and Corr.1, A/52/34, A/52/206 and A/52/267)

63. **Mr. Gjesdal** (Norway) said that in 1995 his delegation had endorsed many of the priorities of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) and the thrust of most of its work programme, but it had made a numberof suggestions for improvements. Since then the Unit had made significant progress in a number of areas, for example in the format and user-friendliness of its reports.

64. The Unit had provided material for judging the benefits of programmes and organizations that had previously been notable for a lack of broad evaluation activity, and he trusted that it would continue to employ impact evaluation in the programmes of the United Nations system. The General Assembly had invited JIU to take full advantage of its system-wide competence and to focus its reports on priority items, namely the identification of specific management, administrative and programming questions aimed at providing practical and action-oriented recommendations. The Unit's programme of work for 1997-1998 reflected those new priorities and his delegation was pleased to note that screening and analysis had become a component of programme formulation. System-wide reports came at a price in terms of resources deployed, but that price was worth paying.

65. The Unit's proposed programme of work seemed ambitious and comprehensive and the emphasis on operational activities was welcome. However, certain JIU reports had struck his delegation as somewhat narrow in scope, and there seemed to be some overlap with regard to the use of experts and consultants. Clarification of those points would be appreciated.

66. The review of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) should be given priority because JIU had not dealt with the topic before and the matter had acquired additional relevance in the context of United Nations reform. The same was true of the review of management and administration in the International Labour Organization (ILO).

67. His delegation noted with satisfaction the elaboration of internal standards and guidelines for inspection, evaluation and investigation (A/51/34, annex I). The proposed follow-up system on reports and recommendations reflected a broader concern with more effective follow up of recommendations of all United Nations oversight bodies. It was important that the proposed new system should be based on the concept of shared responsibility.

68. The quality of research staff was vital to the Unit's effectiveness. In that connection, his delegation wished to know whether there were any rules or practices which prevented the desired system-wide recruitment of suitable staff.

69. His Government believed that JIU had produced many interesting, sound and useful reports over the years, but its recommendations would have greater impact if it concentrated its efforts. The Unit should also develop a better tracking system based on the concept of follow-up as a continuous process.

70. **Ms. Archini De Giovanni** (Italy) said that her delegation was pleased to note the Unit's focus on management, administrative and programming questions, in addition to operational activities for development. Her delegation had also taken note of the Unit's plans to examine, *inter alia*, practices and procedures for awarding contracts, the performance appraisal system, and practices and procedures for senior-level appointments, as well as its proposals for the review of the administrative and financial management of the International Court of Justice. Provided the relevant approved recommendations were properly followed up and implemented, the Unit's reports would be of considerable assistance to the organizations and departments concerned.

71. Her delegation was pleased to learn that JIU was developing a follow-up system to ensure more effective and timely implementation of its recommendations. In the current phase of United Nations reform, the Unit's system-wide contribution would be extremely valuable.

72. **Ms. González Posse** (Argentina) noted with satisfaction the priority that had been assigned in the Unit's programme of work to management, administrative and programming questions aimed at providing practical and action-oriented recommendations. In that regard, her delegation welcomed the establishment of basic parameters for the formulation of the programme of work. Screening and analysis designed to evaluate available human and financial

resources and avoid duplication with other programmes would be conducive to the proper formulation of the programme of work.

73. Her delegation welcomed the adoption of a new report format and the inclusion of specific goals. Timely and ongoing coordination between all internal and external oversight bodies would enable the United Nations to carry out its work more effectively.

74. The new set of revised internal standards and guidelines for inspection, evaluation and investigation was to be welcomed. Her delegation attached particular significance to the measures aimed at achieving more effective follow-up on reports and recommendations contained in annex I to the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (A/52/34).

75. In studying the Unit's individual reports, the General Assembly should refrain from simply taking note of them; it should either approve or reject the recommendations contained therein.

Agenda item 119: Pattern of conferences (A/51/946 and Corr.1 (Russian only), A/52/32 and Add.1, A/52/215 and Add.1, A/52/216 and Add.1, A/52/291 and A/52/340 and Add.1)

76. **Mr. Blukis** (Latvia), Chairman of the Committee on Conferences, introducing that Committee's report (A/52/34 and Add.1), said that one of the most important recommendations made by the Committee to the General Assembly had been the draft calendar of conferences and meetings, which was designed to meet the needs of the Organization and ensure the optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources. Above all, the Committee had sought to avoid the overlapping of meetings relating to the same sector of activity at the same conference location. For nearly 15 years the Committee had monitored trends in the utilization of conference-servicing resources by examining a core sample of intergovernmental bodies within the Organization and notifying those bodies about their performance. He was pleased to report that overall utilization in 1996 had been considerably better than in 1995; the benchmark had been exceeded in New York, and the utilization factor had even approached 90 per cent at Geneva and Vienna. The Committee had waged a lengthy campaign to improve the utilization of conference-servicing resources; it was thus particularly gratifying to see that the role played by the Committee in disseminating information to other bodies had paid off. The Committee would continue to promote further action-oriented solutions designed to assist United Nations bodies in making the most efficient and effective use of the conference-servicing resources allocated to them.

77. The provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States had occasioned some concern. In view of the importance of such meetings for the smooth functioning of sessional bodies, the Committee had expressed concern that 32 per cent of the requests for interpretation services for such meetings had been denied. It had, however, recognized that meetings of Charter and mandated bodies had to be serviced as a matter of priority. Moreover, the Committee had urged intergovernmental bodies to spare no effort in the planning stage to take into account meetings of their regional and other major groupings of Member States, and to dovetail such meetings with those of the sessional body. In addition, it had recommended that intergovernmental bodies should notify conference services well in advance of any cancellations so that unutilized conference-servicing resources could, to the extent possible, be reassigned to meetings of regional and other major groupings of States.

78. In its resolution 51/211 C, the General Assembly had strongly urged the Secretary-General to develop a cost accounting system for Conference Services. Progress had been achieved in that area. The Committee supported further development of such a system, with the recommendation that it should encompass other areas of the Secretariat in addition to conference services. Another of the Committee's concerns had been improved coordination; Conference Services had been requested to maintain an active dialogue with the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies, providing statistics and information on previous performance, as well as guidelines on ways and means of enhancing utilization of conference-servicing resources. At its 1996 session, the Committee had endorsed the Secretariat's proposal to make active dialogue a permanent coordination feature, and had directed that such action should be taken at Headquarters, as well as at Geneva and Vienna.

79. In resolution 51/211 A, the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General to ensure closer cooperation between Headquarters and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in order to improve the coordination of conference services. The Secretariat had also been requested to participate on a regular basis in an active dialogue with Member States as a permanent feature at Headquarters, as well as at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi. Conference Services had indeed continued to conduct an active dialogue which had resulted in improved utilization worldwide. In addition, the Committee had taken an innovative approach to the matter of coordination by

participating in a video meeting with Conference Services officials at Headquarters, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi.

80. The Committee on Conferences had also considered the draft calendar of conferences and meetings of theEconomic and Social Council for 1998 and 1999. Some concern had been expressed regarding the increase in requests from intergovernmental bodies to seek exceptions to the biennialization of their sessions and the Committee had recommended to the Council that it should continue to consider the biennialization of the meetings of its subsidiary bodies.

81. The Committee on Conferences had also considered several items related to documentation. It had been pleased to learn of the progress achieved at other duty stations in reducing the volume and length of the documents processed, and of the numerous steps that had been taken over the past year to reduce paper output, partly through wider access to the optical disk system. Upon reviewing a report on the implementation of the measures regarding the control and limitation of documentation, the Committee had recommended that the General Assembly should consider the advisability of inviting intergovernmental bodies to reduce the length of their reports from 32 to 20 pages over a period of time. It had also recommended that the Assembly should consider the possibility of making specific suggestions to intergovernmental bodies on how such a reduction could be accomplished.

82. Continuing efforts had been made to follow up the initiative taken in 1995 by the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) to use unedited transcripts instead of written meeting records.

83. With regard to the document requirements of Member States and the Secretariat, members of the Committee had expressed satisfaction at the clear trend towards the reduction of documentation requirements. The Secretariat had also reported that internal distribution rules had been changed to achieve significant reductions and that stocks had been cut by half with a consequent alleviation of storage problems. The optical disk system had made it possible to print on demand any essential documents that were out of stock.

84. As to the optical disk system itself, the Committee had been informed that, with effect from June 1997, all permanent missions had been connected to the Internet and through it they could access documents stored on the system. The view had been expressed that the increasing use of electronic media within the United Nations should not be interpreted as eliminating the need for paper-based communication, which continued to be essential, especially for the developing countries. The Committee recommended that the further development of the optical disk system should be encouraged.

85. With regard to translation-related matters, the Committee had been pleased to learn of the release of funds for six new P-3 translator posts and 194 translator workstations. However, concern had also been voiced that the decreased level of funding in the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 for the recruitment of permanent translation staff and the higher proportion of translation earmarked for outsourcing could adversely affect the quality of translation. Concern had also been expressed about the continuing delays in the delivery of translations to delegations, which sometimes made it necessary to delay the start of meetings. Such delays were, however, frequently attributable to the late submission of documents by the substantive departments concerned.

86. The Committee had also examined the survey by the Joint Inspection Unit on the role publications played in implementing the mandates of intergovernmental bodies and the extent to which recurrent publications could be made more cost-effective. The recommendations which had been made in that connection provided very useful guidelines for improving the relevance and effectiveness of the United Nations publications programme. As the customary comments of the Secretary-General on the report had not been made available to the Committee on Conferences, it had decided to limit its endorsement to those recommendations that were addressed directly to substantive legislative bodies. The Committee had further concluded that input from users utilizing the opportunities provided by modern technology might be useful in evaluating future publications programmes.

87. Support had been expressed in the Committee for the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 and for the Secretary-General's reform package relating to conference services. The post of Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services would involve functional authority for conference services throughout the Secretariat, which would lead to closer coordination and improved cost-effectiveness in the use of resources. Support had also been expressed for the establishment of the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services. However, the elimination of posts envisaged in the programme narrative, particularly in translation, might affect the delivery of conference services. The view had been expressed that such budget reductions were justified by technological innovations. The Secretariat had assured members that the new structure envisaged for Conference Services and the proposed

reductions in resources and posts would not affect the volume or quality of the service provided by the Secretariat, especially with regard to the timely translation and publication of documents in the official languages of the United Nations.

88. The Committee on Conferences had taken note of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999 and of the report of the Secretary-General on United Nations reform: measures and proposals (A/52/303).

89. While the Committee on Conferences had successfully completed all of the work on its agenda, participation had been relatively scant. In that connection, some members had referred to the technical nature of the Committee's agenda items, and had requested orientation. He had therefore asked the Secretariat to arrange a briefing prior to the annual organizational session.

90. In conclusion, he said that the Committee on Conferences had endeavoured to provide information to Member States and intergovernmental bodies. Its objective, in formulating its conclusions, recommendations and directives, had invariably been to seek ways and means of benefiting from and improving the already high level of services in the most cost-effective way. He trusted that the Fifth Committee would approve the report of the Committee on Conferences by consensus and that it would consider the resolution on the pattern of conferences on its own merits, without awaiting the outcome of other discussions, and adopt it by consensus at a relatively early stage, as had once been the practice.

91. **Mr. Jin Yongjian** (Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services) said that the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services, established as part of the reform measures, integrated the major technical and support services for the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and their subsidiary bodies formally provided by the Department of Political Affairs, the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development and the Office of Conference and Support Services. The consolidation would strengthen the Secretariat's capacity to provide efficient technical support services while affording significant administrative savings.

92. The overall utilization of conference-servicing resources in New York, Geneva and Vienna in 1996 had exceeded the benchmark of 80 per cent, and had approached 90 per cent at Geneva and Vienna. One reason had been the example of punctuality set by the President of the General Assembly. Another had been the active dialogue between Conference Services and substantive secretariats, which had helped to increase awareness of the importance of utilizing conference-servicing resources efficiently and effectively.

93. In a similar vein, the Secretariat had taken steps to ensure closer cooperation between Headquarters and the United Nations Offices at Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi in order to improve the coordination of conference services. In that regard a video meeting of the Committee on Conferences and officials in Conference Services at the four duty stations had demonstrated how new techniques and means of communication could be applied to conference servicing on a worldwide scale, as well as the central role of the new Department.

94. Progress had been made in facilitating access by developing countries to the optical disk system, which was now available to Internet users. All permanent missions had had access via the Internet since 30 June 1997. A policy for the further expansion of the optical disk system was currently being developed.

95. Mindful of the need to reduce the volume of parliamentary documentation, the Committee on Conferences had requested the Secretariat to present a number of reports orally, including the report on the provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings. Although such services were provided on an "as available" basis, in the 12-month period ending 30 June 1997, 68 per cent of requests for services had been met. As the Committee was aware, meetings of Charter and mandated bodies must be serviced as a priority. Intergovernmental bodies were urged to take into account meetings of regional and other major groupings at the planning stage, to dovetail them with meetings of the sessional body, and to notify Conference Services well in advance of any cancellations so that resources could be reassigned.

96. Further to requests by the General Assembly for improvement and expansion of arrangements and facilities for bilateral meetings and contacts, facilities had been set up in conference rooms A, B, C, D and E, and on the second and third floors of the General Assembly building, during the general debate, as well as during the special commemorative meeting in 1995 and the recent special session of the General Assembly. A reservation system had been instituted, and at each of the previous two sessions more than 800 requests for bilateral meetings had been made, and over 700 such meetings held. A total of 858 bilateral meetings had been held during the 13 days of the general debate at the current session, representing an increase of over 100 meetings compared to 1996.

97. Regarding the cost-accounting system for conference services, the Secretariat, using internal resources, had identified objectives and made proposals, with the guidance of the Committee on Conferences, including the recommendation that such a system should reflect the experience of other duty stations. The system would be developed further, using input from delegations.

98. In his reform measures announced in March 1997, the Secretary-General had set a target of a 25 per cent reduction in the documentation produced by the Secretariat, to be achieved no later than the end of 1998. To that end it had been decided that all documents produced by the Secretariat should be no longer than 16 pages, a reduction from the former standard of 24 pages. He trusted that the General Assembly would similarly consider the adoption of a decision recommending that the reports of its subsidiary bodies should be limited to 20 pages. Member States could further reduce documentation by avoiding requests for reports that were unlikely to contribute substantially to the body of knowledge on a particular subject, and by showing restraint in submitting letters and similar material for circulation. While 1996 had witnessed the reversal of a long-standing trend towards higher volumes of documentation, current projections indicated that an increase might well occur during 1997. The cooperation of intergovernmental bodies and Member States in containing documentation was thus essential.

99. The Secretariat had taken action to reduce the volume of printed material it produced and distributed. The number of copies of documents kept in stock had been halved, and the circulation of documents within the Secretariat and their distribution in conference rooms had been substantially curtailed. Permanent missions at Headquarters had been asked to review their requirements for printed documents, and print runs were being adjusted in accordance with feedback received.

100. A related initiative concerned the development of new document formats, which were gradually being introduced in all languages following the recent acquisition of more powerful text-processing software. The new formats, applicable to all official languages, enhanced readability, preserved a consistent look, were compatible with electronic document processing and storage, and produced savings in reproduction, distribution and storage costs because they reduced paper consumption.

101. Notwithstanding the achievements in the area of conference servicing, not everything was rosy. The Department faced challenges that stretched its resources and its ability to juggle priorities, to the point where it was not satisfied that it always provided Member States with the services they deserved. By way of example, on the eve of the opening of the current session of the General Assembly, less than 40 per cent of pre-session documentation had been submitted, a situation that sorely taxed Conference Services. Staff resources and physical facilities had fallen short of the increasing demand, which impeded the work of regional and other major groupings and hampered the scheduling of multilateral and bilateral meetings.

102. The Department would continue to spare no effort to provide all services required and to improve the quality of its output. He called upon Member States to support the staff of the Department by understanding the limitations they faced, by tempering demands for meetings and documentation with realism, and by endeavouring to make the most efficient and effective use of conference-servicing resources.

103. **Mr. Kuyama** (Joint Inspection Unit), introducing the report of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) on United Nations publications, enhancing cost-effectiveness in implementing legislative mandates (A/51/946), said he regretted that the Secretary-General's comments on the report were not yet available, despite the requirement for such comments to be transmitted no later than three months after receipt of the report. As a result, the Advisory Committee had not been able to prepare its own comments.

104. The question of making publishing activities more cost-effective should be considered a shared responsibility of Member States and the Secretariat. Member States should be more restrained in requests for new publications, which were supposed to be made only after careful and thorough review of existing publications. The Secretariat should be responsible for preparing the basis for such a review, as well as for an efficient and cost-effective production process once publication programmes had been authorized.

105. For some time Member States had indicated the need for a cost-accounting system in a number of areas, including conference services. The Joint Inspection Unit, as indicated in recommendation 11, strongly believed that such a system should also be developed for publishing activities as a matter of priority.

106. There were a number of separate budget provisions relating to publishing, but there was no consolidated budget line indicating the full cost of publishing activities. Recommendation 7 called for a new and more transparent budgetary system in that regard.

107. As indicated in recommendation 1, a review of existing publications should be the first step in planning publication

programmes. There was a need for screening from a number of aspects, including the potential for duplication, relevance to specific rather than general mandates, and financial implications. Recommendations 5, 6, 8 and 9 were presented along those lines. As indicated in recommendation 4, the interdepartmental Publications Board, which was mandated to play a coordinating and supervisory role in publication programmes, should be strengthened.

108. Streamlining the publishing process was a major issue at the production phase. While the situation had somewhat improved, there was room for further improvement. The Secretary-General should therefore conduct a comprehensive review of the current administrative, managerial and organizational structure associated with publishing activities, as indicated in recommendations 3 and 10.

109. Recommendation 14 encouraged more use of advanced technologies, including electronic processing and publishing. Recommendations 12 and 13 referred to the question of internal versus external printing.

110. On distribution and sales, recommendation 17 proposed a review of the current treatment of the income generated by the sale of publications, with a view to using such income in a more rational, flexible and effective manner.

111. In the interest of establishing a sound publications policy, recommendation 2 suggested that existing publications policies and practices should be reviewed and modified.

112. At its August 1997 session, the Committee on Conferences had expressed the view that the JIU recommendations provided very useful guidelines for improving the relevance and effectiveness of the publications programme (A/52/32, para. 123), and had decided to endorse a number of the recommendations pending comment by the Secretary-General and ACABQ. He hoped that the Fifth Committee would take decisive action on the recommendations.

113. While the report focused on issues at the United Nations, the Joint Inspection Unit had, in preparing the report, approached most of the organizations in the United Nations system, as well as some outside the system, with a view to benefiting from their practices. JIU believed that the thrust of its recommendations could also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to a number of other organizations within the system.

114. **Mr. Farid** (Saudi Arabia) said that his delegation endorsed the two previous statements and welcomed the efforts made to reduce documentation and to promote use of the optical disk system. It was very important to implement a cost-accounting system, since it was likely to save millions of dollars. He asked that a detailed, written explanation of where matters stood should be provided as soon as possible.

115. **Mr. Sulaiman** (Syrian Arab Republic) said that at the United Nations Office at Vienna there had been a post for a coordinator for Arabic and a post for a teacher of Arabic. The latter post, having existed for 15 years, had now been abolished. He requested a full explanation.

116. **The Chairman** said that the Secretariat had taken note of the questions raised.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.